

# It's not exotic. It's Indian

By Meenakshi Shedde | Times Of India | 24th January 1998

MEENAKSHI SHEDDE on the superb, brooding film *Such a Long Journey*, screened at the IFFI in Hyderabad

It seems as if it is India's turn to take its place in the sun after all, cinematically speaking. This is happening through two antipodal and unrelated influences: India's Shekhar Kapur has exploded on the international film circuit with his *Elizabeth*, a wholly foreign subject, while Sturla Gunnarsson, a Canadian director of Icelandic origin, has won critical acclaim at several international film festivals for his memorable Indian film *Such a Long Journey*, based on Rohinton Mistry's eponymous Booker Prize-nominated book. *Elizabeth* has secured three Golden Globe nominations, and *Such a Long Journey* 12 nominations at the Canadian Genie Awards.

The film, screened at the International Film Festival of India in Hyderabad, is a welcome cinematic departure. It is not often that a foreign director without Indian roots (his only tenuous link is a Canadian wife of Sikh origin) directs a film about India. More importantly, one that is obsessed neither with the Raj nor the poverty, but is about life like it is. While the recent *Bombay Bays* and *Hyderabad Blues* are fresh, irreverent first films with NRI directors looking at India as 'outsiders', *Journey*, ironically, has a foreign director with an insider's perspective. Gunnarsson directs it with both masterly control and delicate feeling. Indeed, we already had a taste of his caliber with his extraordinary Emmy Award-winning documentary *Gerrie and Louise*, shown in Mumbai some months ago.

*Such a Long Journey* is a brooding film with glimmers of hope and affection softly lighting up its dark corners. It is about the endeavours of an ordinary Parsi bank clerk Gustad Noble (Roshan Seth), to remain sane and upright in a world that threatens to sweep him off his feet with its wholly unexpected iniquities and betrayals. His son leaves the house one fine day, his wife (Soni Razdan) takes to black magic in an effort to cope, his daughter seems at death's door and, thanks to his friend Jimmy Bilimoria (Naseeruddin Shah), a RAW agent, he finds himself caught in a web of intrigue involving the siphoning of funds meant for the Bangladeshi resistance during the war of 1971. (This incident in the book is based on the well-known Nagarwalla case of the '70s, concerning a RAW agent alleged to have been framed on charges of impersonating Mrs Indira Gandhi and siphoning funds meant for the Mukti Bahini. He is reported to have died in prison in mysterious circumstances, with members of the commission of inquiry investigating the case also being killed in what was officially described as a road accident.)

*Journey* dares to implicate prime minister Indira Gandhi, though indirectly, in the embezzlement of funds meant for the Mukti Bahini. This is breathtaking, simply because Indians are so unaccustomed to dealing with contemporary political history with honesty, at least in cinema. While we relish foreign films like *All the President's Men*, *Wag the Dog* and *Primary Colours* that probe unpalatable political truths, we have had somewhat more tentative explorations with films like Santosh Sivan's *The Terrorist*, Mani Ratnam's *Bombay*, *Roja* and *Dil Se* and Pamela Rooks' *Train to Pakistan*.

*Journey* is yet to be cleared by the censors and will be a litmus test of the integrity of the censor board.

Roshan Seth puts in a brilliant portrayal; it must be one of his career best performances. It surpassed his roles in Mississippi Masala, Gandhi and The Journey directed by Harish Saluja. A warmly-etched portrayal of a man who relishes the small joys of life even as fate lays him low. Seth plays Noble with a compassion that is almost palpable. The other outstanding discovery is Kurush Deboo (of Percy fame), who puts in an unforgettable performance as Tehmul, the local half-wit. He plays the role with a manic energy with an incredible yen for accuracy - the nervous, repetitive babble of the deranged, the absent-minded scratching of his ear or crotch, the leaps of childish glee with saliva dribbling down his chin. One of the most heartbreaking moments in the film is when Soni Razdan is trimming his nails for her witchcraft. Long unaccustomed to personal attention, this triggers memories in Deboo, who rolls his eyes heavenward, shrugging his shoulders warmly, muttering 'Mummy, mummy,' as Razdan looks away guiltily. Deboo is certainly one of our finest young actors and deserves a great career.

The cast (including Om Puri, Sam Dastoor, Pearl Padamsee and Ranjit Chowdhry) is able to give of its best thanks partly to Sooni Taraporevala's richly nuanced screenplay, an effective adaptation of the book that leavens the film's contretemps with a wry humour. The photography by Jan Kiesser superbly captures the somber reflections of the film, while production designer Nitin Desai creates a convincing ambience.

However, it must be said that the political angle rests a bit uneasily with the rest of this family-oriented film. Moreover, Mumbai seems a city of non-stop fascinations that Roshan Seth comes across on his way to work, a list straight off the Lonely Planet guide to India, with colourful Islamic celebrations, paanwallahs describing 'bed-breaker paans,' Chor Bazar gee-gaws, Kamathipura and pavement artists who paint gods on walls-turned-urinals.

For all that, the film, produced by Paul Stephens and Simon MacCorkindale and distributed by United Studios Limited, has deservedly won much acclaim. Its 12 Genie nominations included those for best film, best direction, best screenplay, best actor (Roshan Seth), Best Supporting Actor (Kurush Deboo), Best Cinematography, art direction, costume design (by Lovleen Bains) and best original score by Jonathan Goldsmith. India deserves to see this film.

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